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SUBJECT: CAMEROON: JUSTICE MINISTER DISCUSSES REFORM PRIORITIES IN LIGHT OF HRR

¶1. (SBU) The Government of Cameroon (GRC) acknowledges the persistence of significant human rights violations in Cameroon, but is committed to stepping up investigations and punishment of violators, according to Amadou Ali, the Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Justice. Ambassador, accompanied by Poloff, met recently with Ali to discuss the recently-released Human Rights Report for Cameroon, the protracted incarceration of employees of American transport company Le Car, and the GRC's anti-corruption efforts (septel).

Protracted Incarceration of Le Car Staff

¶2. (SBU) On February 27, Ambassador met with Ali to follow up on a letter she sent him to request further information regarding the arrest and continued incarceration of four Cameroonian nationals working for the Le Car bus company, a subsidiary of American investor Transnational Automotive Group (TAUG). Ali provided the GRC's version of events, saying the arrests were made pursuant to allegations that members of Le Car's guard force (contracted from G4S) assaulted a Cameroonian magistrate on orders from the Le Car bus station manager. Ali's account differed substantially from what Le Car has told us, but Ali admitted that, under Cameroon's new criminal procedure code, the four individuals should have been granted bail rather than kept incarcerated for more than three weeks while awaiting a hearing. Ali assured the Ambassador that the four would be granted bail as soon as they requested it. (Note. TAUG officials told the Embassy that the four individuals were released on bail within the week. Their trial date is still pending. End note.)

Pre-Judging the HRR

¶3. (SBU) Admitting that he hadn't read the courtesy copy of the 2008 HRR the Ambassador sent him the day it was released, Ali launched into a commentary on the HRR process, saying foreigners who commented on the human rights situation in Cameroon were never willing to acknowledge steps the GRC had taken to improve the situation and often compiled their reports without having visited Cameroon. Ambassador and Poloff explained that the USG dedicated substantial resources to compiling the annual HRR and highlighted GRC progress whenever appropriate, as had been done in the 2008 HRR for those areas (including corruption, prisons, women's rights and other issues) where there had been meaningful positive developments.

Cameroon's Mentality: "Authority Before Justice"

¶4. (SBU) Ali said he is trying to change the prevailing mentality among Cameroonian magistrates, which is to "throw someone in jail first, then to reflect on what he might have done," a legacy of Cameroon's turbulent early years of independence, when "authority took priority over justice." To illustrate this point, Ali pointed out that there are fewer than 60 courts at all levels in Cameroon to

dispense justice, while "authority" is exercised by 500 administrative units, 1,000 gendarmerie units, 400-500 intelligence (DGRE) offices and dozens of military units. Ali estimated that Cameroon currently incarcerates about 24,000 people, of whom about 4,000 should be released on bail under the new criminal procedure code. To relieve the burden on the justice system, Ali said he is hiring more magistrates (especially to handle cases in Douala, Cameroon's largest city) and seeking to integrate traditional courts into the formal justice system to handle pedestrian civil disputes.

Prisons Are a Priority

¶15. (SBU) Saying that prison reform remains a top priority, Ali predicted that "Cameroon's prisons will be completely revamped within three years." Ali reviewed the GRC's plans to spend 1.2 billion CFA (about \$2.4 million) in a joint program with the EU to construct new prisons and refurbish existing structures. For the first time in Cameroon's history, the prison budgets include line items for medications, Ali boasted.

Better the Minister You Know...

¶16. (SBU) Comment. Ali was customarily prickly in denouncing foreign finger-waggers and defending Cameroon's justice system while at the same time admitting its shortcomings. Ali is a stalwart of the "authority before justice" regime and he played a central role in the GRC's questionable response to the riots of February 2008, but his long record of service is marked by uncommon competence and integrity. Our contacts still wax eloquent about his unparalleled effectiveness as Minister of Defense (1997-2001). Mindful that the

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next Minister of Justice might not offer the same opportunities for engagement and reform, we have already begun coordinating with other donors to identify some shared priorities for short-term action.
End comment.